

Report from the Field

Last week we found a dozen or so Tomato Hornworms on our outdoor tomatoes. They were big, up to 3 inches. We were quite pleased not to see any in the greenhouse, where the bulk of our tomato harvest has, and hopefully will, come from.



But then on Saturday we started to find them in the greenhouse. They were smaller, but they were numerous. We found somewhere in the neighborhood of 100. We are surprised at how early and how many there are this year, and are wondering if the heat we've had hastened their emergence. If left to their devices (their appetites), they could easily defoliate all of our plants in a matter of a week. So, we will be picking them off by hand (a task that takes hours), at least every other day.



The easy way to deal with tomato hornworms in conventional and organic programs is to spray an insecticide, such as one containing pyrethrin (a pesticide that costs very little – \$1 or \$2 per application – allowed under Organic Certification). But the damage to non-target insects, such as all the bees we count on for pollination, and wasps that help to control other damaging insects, is real and extensive. Spraying sets up a cycle of dependence on more pesticides. We also don't feel confident that these products are safe for us to be spraying, or for us and you to be consuming. Therefore we will continue our approach to farming: zero pesticide use.

We normally do get a few tomato hornworms, but they are normally later in the season, and they are normally covered with parasitic wasp cocoons. This picture is from a few years ago, in late August. All the white "pills" on the hornworm's back are parasitic wasp cocoons.



The good news is the plants have not been impacted significantly. The bad news, for us, is that we will be spending an additional 10 hours a week looking for bugs. In some places in the world these worms are eaten, want some?